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ABSTRACT

Interviews with Arkansas fourth, fifth, and sixth graders revealed a blatant contradiction between the objectives of the language arts curricula and the children's opinions about the appropriateness of their language. While the students uniformly regarded their own dialects as satisfactory and unchanged by school, when questioned specifically about the content of their English classes, they revealed awareness of the attempt to modify their grammar and linguistic styles. The dichotomy reflected in these responses is mirrored in two commonly used educational materials, a document which consolidates behavioral objectives for language and literature instruction in the Arkansas elementary and secondary schools and a series of elementary language arts textbooks. These materials reveal both an orientation which values the preservation of dialect variation and a point of view which stresses the importance of instituting standard English usage. (KS)

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TEACHER, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?

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The topic of this symposium is "The Teaching of Dialect in the Classroom--School and College," and this paper related to that topic in a peculiar way.[1] It owes its derivation to a dialect survey, but it is not concerned with using data from that survey in the classroom. In fact, it does not show how to teach dialect at all. It may be more accurate to say that the paper is concerned with our failure in the teaching of dialect, for it treats the discrepancy between what teachers think they are teaching and what students think they are being taught and with the effect this instruction is really having.

My interest in these problems was stimulated when I began conducting interviews for the Arkansas Language Survey, which is an investigation into linguistic variation.[2] In addition to collecting representative samples of Arkansas dialect, the survey is designed to elicit speakers' subjective reactions about their language and the language of other Americans. One-third of the subjects of this survey are youngsters in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. In my own interviewing and in listening to the recorded interviews conducted by co-workers I became struck by the children's responses in the subjective reaction portion of the survey. Again and again their responses are in blatant contradiction to objectives of language arts curriculums at their grade levels. These interviews reveal a clear contrast between what curriculum planners, elementary textbook writers,

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and teachers intend to teach about usage and standards and what school children think they are being taught. Furthermore, the students' own language in the interviews usually clashes strongly with appropriate norms described in their textbooks.

After my attention was drawn to these student responses I decided to make a comparative study. Since it was impractical to attempt to interview every teacher of each of our school-children, I decided upon what seemed to be a satisfactory alternative. I chose to compare the student behavior with established goals for language arts curriculums. Specifically, I studied a document entitled Behavioral Objectives Language and Literature Grades K-12, prepared by a special committee and L. C. Leach, the Supervisor of English-Language Arts for the Arkansas State Department of Education. Secondly, I consulted one of the most popular series of elementary language arts textbooks approved for adoption in Arkansas, a series called Language and How to Use It, by Andrew Schiller, Marion Monroe, Ralph Nichols, William Jenkins, and Charlotte Huck. Collectively, these curriculum materials are taken to be a representative point of view, although the point of view is plainly less traditional and conservative than that shared by many Arkansas teachers.

In general principles there is strong agreement between Behavioral Objectives and Language and How to Use It. Not surprisingly, both are basically oriented to the teaching of syntax (a very standard version of syntax, naturally). Both

also make a distinction--not always maintained--between grammar and usage. Furthermore, both treat usage in dubious fashion as a component of dialect.

In Behavioral Objectives under the heading "Dialect" there are twelve objectives. Taking into account the writers' acknowledgement that because of the scope and nature of the book teachers must select objectives appropriate for their own schools and grade levels, four of those twelve objectives are appropriate for the schoolchildren we interview in grades 4-6. Those four are the following:

1. A student will display knowledge that everyone speaks an individual dialect (idiolect) as measured by his ability to recognize and note specific differences in his pronunciation and usage as compared with that of his peers.
2. The student will respond positively to the differences in dialects as measured by teacher observation of his acceptance of the dialect of his peers. (Emphasis added.)
7. The student will recognize differences in his own dialect as measured by his ability to pinpoint specific differences in his word usage and pronunciation in two given situations. (In the classroom vs. on the playground--formal or informal.)
8. The student will display comprehension that language is appropriate or inappropriate rather than correct

> or incorrect as measured by his ability to determine which levels of usage are appropriate in specific language situations. (Behavioral Objectives, p. 12.)

If any proof is necessary for the claim of appropriateness of these objectives to our children, lessons in books 3-6 of Language and How to Use It have these same objectives. The stated goals in Behavioral Objectives are clear. Students are expected to learn that language differences are natural, they are expected to accept those differences as equally legitimate varieties of the language, and they are expected to develop sophisticated senses of language relativity and appropriateness instead of simple-minded and false distinctions between right and wrong, correct and incorrect, or good and bad English.

The same point of view is espoused in Language and How to Use It. In an introductory essay entitled "A Few Words About Grammar in General," which is printed in the Teacher's Edition of each book in the series, Schiller distinguishes usage from grammar and defends the lessons on usage in the series. Usage lessons are headed "Language for All Occasions," in the children's texts, appropriateness is stressed with the weary and misleading analogy to clothes, and the paragraphs in the Teacher's Edition headed "Emphasis" and "Explanation" for each lesson remind teachers that it is important for children to recognize and accept language differences (so long as they are only stylistic, I must add, for no other kinds of differences are included in these lessons) and to learn to use standard forms when appropriate.

Throughout the texts are scattered lessons designed to teach and reinforce standard usage because "many children are not exposed to standard English in their homes," (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 33).

I want to stress that these are so-called progressive materials, but they still put heavy stress on teaching a very standardized syntax and on learning to use Standard English in addition to the English kids use naturally. These books may be "liberal," but like the traditional school grammars which preceded them, they are hell-bent on changing kids' language and on changing it in ways that educators think it ought to be changed.

Our interviews with the school children as a part of the Arkansas Language Survey give us a quite different picture of what happens (or does not happen) in the classroom. When we get to the subjective reaction portion of the interview we ask, "What do you think about the way you talk?" The kids invariably say, "It's OK," or something comparably affirmative. We follow this question by asking such things as "Have you ever tried to change the way you talk?" "Has anybody else ever tried to change the way you talk?" "Has a teacher ever tried to correct the way you talk?" To the best of my knowledge, every child we have interviewed answered all these questions with firm "No's."

Something is fishy. Are these kids lying to us? There is absolutely no reason to suspect the truthfulness of these boys and girls anywhere else in the interview. In fact, the

seriousness and cooperative spirit of these children are fantastic. Why, then, would every one of them suddenly, at precisely the same point of the interview, refuse to tell us the truth? If this is what happens, if these kids are lying--although I do not think they are--why would they do it? The only reason I can think of is an ugly one. Like bed-wetters who have been humiliated simply because they are sound sleepers with weak bladder muscles, these kids may choose to lie rather than to confess their humiliation. If their teachers are using the time-honored but otherwise dishonorable technique of making students so ashamed and embarrassed about how bad their English is that they will be motivated to change, then these children may have reason for denying that they are victims of such teaching. If learning to alter their English is not stigmatized like this, why would they have reason to deny that they are learning different language forms? If these children are hiding the truth about their education, their teachers have no reason to be proud.

What if, on the other hand, these kids are telling the truth--or what they think is the truth? I prefer to think they are being truthful here as everywhere else in the interview. But it still seems impossible that they have never had teachers who try to alter their language. Then what are their teachers doing? Actually they are doing just what you would expect. In another part of the interview we encourage the youngsters to talk about school. When we ask them about classes they like best

and least, English is always the least-liked class. Why do they dislike English? They tell us they don't like English because they have to study grammar. In grammar classes, so they tell us, they are taught to not say "ain't" as well as to avoid all the usage shibboleths schoolchildren are usually taught. But remember, these are the same children who insist that teachers never try to change their language.

How could such a misunderstanding take place? How could the intentions of teachers go awry so badly? I am not sure, but I have a suspicion. One problem may very well be that teachers are attempting to teach some sophisticated notions of linguistic relativity to children who are too immature to comprehend the task that they are confronted with. We know that the ten- to twelve-year-olds participating in the Arkansas Language Survey perceive language differences but attach no significance--especially social significance--to them. At their age it is doubtful that very many, if any, have naturally become multi-style speakers. If they are not developed enough linguistically to begin style shifting, they may not understand the concept of appropriateness or how they are to shift linguistically in order to talk appropriately. Indeed, they may confuse their teachers' talk about linguistic appropriateness in grammar and pronunciation with their sense of polite or respectful behavior. (As an aside, I would like to acknowledge that this confusion is not something peculiar to 10-12-year-old kids. It is shared by their teachers and even those American

sociolinguistics who insist on treating in one stylistic continuum variation which is in reality governed by a multitude of contextual constraints.) Since attitudes about language differences are simply reflections about speakers of different types of language, then it ought to be obvious that these children have not learned to categorize and stereotype people on the basis of how they talk.

Maybe another reason these kids do not know what their teachers are trying to do is that the teachers themselves don't know what they are doing. If the teachers aren't any surer than the writers of their textbooks, then they are in trouble. Here are some examples from Language and How to Use It. (1) At one point the authors stress appropriateness and remind students "that there are times and places in which one form may be more acceptable than another (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 33), yet at another time they tell teachers, "Remind youngsters that the language they are learning in schools is language for all occasions." (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 76). (2) In their inconsistent reaffirmations of the appropriateness doctrine they are totally unrealistic about the perceptions of ten-year-olds. In the Teacher's Edition of Book 3, for example, they advise teachers to encourage kids to use Standard English "in the classroom and wherever else it seems appropriate." (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 76.) (3) The authors themselves seem to have little knowledge of appropriateness, because they tell teachers to encourage the kids to use Standard English in "daily conversations...as often as they can" (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 36) without regard for consequences in peer groups for talking

like English teachers make them talk in their classes. (4) On one hand they tell teachers "youngsters should not be made to feel that their kind of English is 'wrong'" (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 33), but on the other hand usage lessons are intended "for people who make usage errors" (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 76) or "do not use the correct verb forms" (Teacher's Edition, Book 4, p. 71). (5) The authors cannot decide whether their lessons are intended to add to a child's language or replace some forms with others. If you look on one page you find them telling teachers, "Make it very clear that youngsters are adding Standard English to their ways of speaking, not discarding what they may have." (Teacher's Edition, Book 3, p. 36). But later they say this about those exercises: "Pupils who needed to change their speech patterns concentrated their efforts upon eliminating a few very common errors" (Teacher's Edition, Book 4, p. 51).

Now the question is, "Who is confused? The kids or their teachers and their textbook writers? Perhaps the youngsters unconsciously sense that such adults do not have to be taken seriously. One thing is clear. These kids regard their English language instruction as nothing more than a series of educational hurdles with no purpose other than being obstacles to overcome. For them English classes remain special, peculiar, isolated worlds with little or no connection with or relevance to the real world outside the classroom.

NOTES

1. A preliminary version of this paper was read at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, New Orleans, November 30, 1974.

2. A description of the Arkansas Language Survey may be found in Underwood 1972.

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